

May 21, 2006

Editorial: Democrats' oil plan has obvious omission

CAFE program has proved that mileage rules work best.

There are useful ideas in the Senate Democrats' plan for reducing American oil imports, introduced last week, but the most significant aspect of this program is what's missing: insistence on dramatically higher fuel-economy standards.

Everybody knows that raising mileage requirements is the best available way to get rapid and dramatic cuts in U.S. oil consumption (and, not incidentally, in demand-sensitive gasoline prices). Even if the government were willing to consider European-sized consumption taxes, a political impossibility, efficiency rules still have proven advantages.

In the dozen years after the so-called CAFE standards were adopted in 1975, the average new-car efficiency went from 13.1 miles per gallon to 22.1 -- and with minimal impact on manufacturers, who exceeded the requirements for most of those years, or on Americans' motoring way of life. We soon grew accustomed to smaller vehicles and slightly higher sticker prices, because we could keep driving pretty much as we pleased. A tax that doubled the pump price would have worked more quickly, of course, but easing the economic disruptions would have been a nightmarish task.

Why, then, does the Democratic leadership now center its hopes on a massive national conversion to vehicles burning 85 percent ethanol? It's a good fuel, and it's renewable, and neither automakers nor their customers will be much burdened by a requirement that E85-capable engines be installed in 25 percent of new cars built in 2010 (rising to 50 percent in 2020).

But getting E85 pumps installed at 10 percent of the country's gas stations is a challenge of an entirely different magnitude, considering the current number is somewhere in the low 200s (with half of them in just one state, Minnesota). Producing that much alcohol no simple matter, either. And even with such a system in place, motorists seeking E85 will have to pass up nine gas stations out of 10.

Right now in Europe, 30-mpg cars are common; American scientists and automotive engineers have said for years that 40 mpg and better can be achieved, even in full-sized cars and minivans, with modifications drivers would find essentially invisible: better ignition controls, more efficient transmissions and drivetrains, lower-friction tires, lighter but equally sturdy materials in place of some steel components.

Such vehicles could be produced at an extra cost of under \$1,000 apiece, including an E85-capable engine, and over a decade or so could raise the fleet average from today's 27 mpg to 35 mpg -- a saving of 440 million barrels of oil per year even if none burned E85.

So raising the CAFE standards is the obvious first step for a nation serious about breaking its oil addiction, and wouldn't interfere in the slightest with expanding ethanol use, or programs to encourage hybrid gas/electric cars, or any other gas-saving initiative. It would have been taken years ago if not for opposition from the auto and oil industries.

Lately even the Bush administration has come to see virtue in at least appearing to favor higher CAFE standards. Last fall it proposed to end the absurd CAFE exemption for SUVs, and earlier this month it argued for a "restructuring" of the requirements for other vehicles -- replacing the fleet-average approach with new, class-specific standards.

These were hardly earthshaking reforms -- the SUV standards are lenient, and the administration has yet to describe its efficiency goals or timetables for other vehicles. But compared with the Democrats' silence, they look like leadership.

All the more reason for Harry Reid, Dick Durbin and their colleagues to retool their new energy plan, giving ambitious new CAFE standards a central role.

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